

Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

California's future depends on the excellence of our public schools. We need to ensure that students master high-school-level English–language arts and mathematics skills, have the ability to solve problems, work as members of a team, and use technology so that they can be successful in the twenty-first century. To preserve democracy in a diverse nation, our schools and communities also need to provide experiences and knowledge that will build students' civic competencies of tolerance, communication, conflict resolution, and participation in public life.

Enabling all students to achieve at high levels requires transforming the current kindergarten through twelfth grade system of education. Substantial progress at the high school level cannot be made by isolated districts and schools or by creating a few high-quality, high-profile schools. Strategies are needed that enhance all schools and support them in their efforts to provide effective teaching and learning; engage students in their own education; and offer clear pathways to post-secondary education, careers, and community participation.

Aiming High was conceived as a how-to document that places standards-based education in the context of California's rigorous new accountability system. The document does not suggest that all high schools must adopt identical approaches. Rather its focus is to guide districts and communities in implementing a standards-based educational system that best meets local needs, and its ultimate purpose is to provide a road map for raising student achievement. This task, although daunting, is critical to the future of California and the nation.

Educational reform typically sets out to change a district or school, but in the end the district or school often changes the reform by transforming it or assimilating it into existing structures. We need to avoid losing the essence of these reforms; instead we need to make profound changes in school district and high school operations and community expectations.

We all remember our high school years. Surely it was never an easy time, no matter what generation we belong to. Now the challenges facing our young people and us are greater than ever before. We cannot back away from our quest to improve our schools; we must continue to *aim high*. Otherwise, we will have failed our students.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jack O'Connell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

JACK O'CONNELL

State Superintendent of Public Instruction